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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**A Deadbeat Nation?  
An Analysis of the Causes  
of US Budget Arrears to the United Nations**

CORE COURSE III ESSAY

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The United States played a pivotal role in the creation of the United Nations fifty years ago and has made the UN a central part of its national security strategy ever since. The Clinton administration in particular has increasingly relied on the offices and offerings of the UN to pursue its foreign policy. For example, the UN was essential in implementing the US policy toward Iraq, both in the destruction of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and in maintaining economic sanctions. The UN also played a key role in the US strategy toward Haiti, Bosnia and Somalia. The US even used the UN and the threat of UN Security Council sanctions in its bilateral nuclear negotiations with North Korea. As such, it is not surprising that President Clinton has maintained that the UN performs an indispensable function. What may appear somewhat surprising is that the US is nearly one and a half billion dollars in arrears to the UN and these arrears, according to the Secretary General of the UN, have brought the UN to the brink of collapse.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly odd considering the fact that the US acknowledges that dues to the UN are a freely accepted treaty obligation.

The purpose of this essay is to explain why the US has not fully paid its UN assessment given the UN's apparent importance to American leaders and the widespread view that, at least in theory, the US should fulfill its treaty obligations and pay its debts. This paper focuses on the political process and how actors at various levels in the US decision making process have yielded a result that appears on its surface to be quite odd. We show how at each level, in the Congress, in the White House, and in the executive bureaucracy, institutional factors reinforced by a general ambivalence toward the UN combine to yield this result. Moreover, we examine why interest groups have not been able to substantially alter this policy.

## Congress Making Foreign Policy

Congress has the constitutional authority to appropriate funds and thus our discussion of the UN arrears must begin with Congress. Congress has consistently appropriated less for the UN than the President has requested.<sup>1</sup> Congress is the proximate cause of US arrears to the UN.

The issue of UN dues is often posed in terms of a Congress that is simply ideologically opposed to multilateral institutions. Indeed, soon after President Clinton took office, Republican critics accused the UN of usurping US sovereignty. The Republican Contract with America called for scaling back US involvement in the UN and Republican Representative Joe Scarborough (Florida) introduced legislation in 1995 (HR2535) that would force the US to withdraw from the UN within four years.<sup>2</sup> In the Senate, Jesse Helms, Chairman of the congressional committee that authorizes UN dues payments (Foreign Relations Committee) wrote an article published in *Foreign Affairs* arguing that as it currently operates, the UN “does not deserve continued American support.”<sup>3</sup> This negative view is not limited to Republicans. For example, Senator Byrd, a West Virginia Democrat, has argued critically that UN activities are too expansive and need to be reigned in.<sup>4</sup>

While this ideological opposition to many UN activities is important to the issue of US arrears to the UN, the attitude does not characterize the whole of Congress. According to Representative Benjamin Gilman, the Republican Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, “Congress as a whole recognizes the importance of the UN.”<sup>5</sup> And, even though Senator Helms is the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee which authorizes UN appropriations, a pro-UN Senate staffer argued, “Helm’s bark is much worse than his bite.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Congress’s general acceptance of the UN is reflected in the fact that,

while the US is substantially in arrears to the UN, it has paid a major portion of its dues, even under the Republican Congress.

Nevertheless, the aversion of a minority in Congress to UN operations and multilateralism in general facilitates an atmosphere that allows members, in particular those on the relevant appropriation subcommittee, to use arrears as leverage to accomplish policy goals and to express displeasure with the policies of the UN and the President. If it were not for the backdrop of Congress that is critical of the UN, withholding dues to express displeasure with particular policies might be considered unacceptable.

Congress has withheld funds necessary to fulfill US obligations to the UN in an attempt to use these funds as leverage to influence the President and the UN. Withholding arrears to the UN is Congress' most direct means of exerting influence on the UN and the executive branch on UN issues. Congress has linked several UN issues to its annual appropriations for the UN, most importantly management reform. For example, for FY 1994, responding to allegations of wasteful UN spending, Congress specified that years US payments be withheld until the UN appointed an Inspector General.<sup>viii</sup> According to the executive Director of the United Nations Association, Congress believes that reform in the UN can only come about through withholding or arrears and threatening to continue to do so. However, he adds that there is no consensus on what "reform" means.<sup>x</sup> Because Congress has no other direct means of influencing the UN, its policy has devolved to leveraging UN arrears.

The arrears are also a manifestation of Congress's displeasure with the UN and the President's policy *vis a vis* the UN. For example, last year, Congress passed legislation reducing the US payments for UN peacekeeping operations from 31% to 25% of the total UN costs. This unilateral step adds substantially to US arrears to the UN. This legislation reflects

a belief in Congress that the US pays too large a fraction of UN peacekeeping expenses, but it was motivated by the perception that the UN failed in its peacekeeping efforts in Somalia and Yugoslavia, and that the UN would nevertheless continue an assertive role in international affairs, supported by the current US administration

Congressional ire toward the UN and the administration's policies have become particularly acute when Congresses institutional powers appear to be threatened. According to an official at OMB, Congress as a whole took great offense to the enormous increases in the UN peacekeeping budget in the 1990's in large part because they appeared to undermine its powers of the purse.<sup>x</sup> UN peacekeeping activities in the former Yugoslavia during this period led to an enormous cost increase, from about 1 billion in 1990 to nearly 3.5 billion in 1995. Because the increases were unexpected, the administration did not request funding in its normal budget request. This meant that the administration requested a huge supplemental *after* the peacekeeping dollars had been spent. As a consequence, many in Congress felt they were given a *fait accompli*, a *fait accompli* for a mission that many did not fully support. Not only did some in Congress see this as a request for large amount of money for a failed mission, but it also appeared to undermine their authority to determine spending priorities.

Finally, there is a structural issue in the House that contributes to the continuing arrears to the UN. This is that the authorizing committee that would be more inclined to support paying our UN arrears has lost power relative to the appropriating committee. Indeed, Congress has not passed a State Department (and UN) authorizing bill in two years. In Congress, the Congressional Budget sets the overall ceilings on expenditures in broad accounts, such as the "150" account for international affairs. The authorizing committees (Foreign Relations Committee) provide the next level of refinement and offer policy guidance

and limitations to the appropriating subcommittees. The authorizers in the House typically have more of an institutional commitment to the programs they authorize as well as a broader, longer-term view, and thus they are more inclined to have the US fulfill its treaty obligations. In the opinion of one staffer on the House Foreign Relations Committee, the appropriators have no “grand vision.”<sup>xj</sup> According to another Republican staffer, because the authorizing committee has weak leadership, it does not have leverage to sufficiently influence appropriators. Thus, according to another Republican staffer on the authorization committee, “policy has devolved to the appropriators.”

Of course, in focusing on the very important institutional reasons for US arrears, we must not ignore an issue that affects all levels of government: US budget limitations. In an era of reduced funding for all aspects of government, UN dues are inevitably going to come under pressure. UN dues compete directly with funds for other State Department activities and even with domestic priorities in budget debates. This is accentuated by the fact UN dues are considered in the Commerce, Justice, State and Judiciary Appropriations Subcommittee. As such, dollars for the UN are competing with dollars for domestic law enforcement initiatives in the subcommittee. While in theory the funding level for the international affairs is set in the Congressional Budget Resolution, in some cases funds destined for international activities have been shifted to domestic initiatives.<sup>xii</sup> These challenges of balancing priorities affects the executive branch of government -- which we will discuss in the next section -- as it does the Congress.

### **The Administration: Defending the UN While Criticizing It**

We have spent a substantial portion of this essay analyzing Congress because only it has the constitutional authority to appropriate funds and also has rhetorically offered the

greatest resistance to paying UN dues. However, the President and his administration obviously also have an important influence on whether the US pays its UN arrears. For example, despite the administration's public statements that the US should pay its arrears, it has not proposed payment of arrears that were withheld in the past for certain "policy" disagreements with the UN, such as expenses associated with support for the Palestinian Liberation Organizations (PLO) and costs for some conferences that the US opposed.<sup>xiii</sup> Moreover, the administration has never requested full arrears payment from the Congress and has not attempted to rectify a change made by Budget Director Stockman a decade ago that leads to US payment of its dues ten months late every year, which adds to US arrears.

Even for that portion of the UN arrears that the administration believes the US should pay to the UN -- about \$700 million of the \$1.4 billion the UN believes the US owes -- the administration has not pressured Congress to appropriate funds. Just as the Congress can affect presidential decisions, the executive branch of government has a variety of ways it can influence the Congress to appropriate needed funds for an activity that is important to it. The executive can take steps ranging from publicly berating the Congress on an issue that has public appeal to linking congressional action to actions the Congress may want the executive to take. As one pro-UN Senate staffer argued, Congress has "been set up as the boogieman on the UN issue. Congress is simply trying to balance competing interests and the President has not offered sufficient pressure to convince Congress to pay arrears."<sup>xiv</sup> While the Clinton Administration has publicly stated that the US should pay its arrears to the UN, it has focused its leverage on domestic issues.

The administration has not followed through in pressing Congress to appropriate the funds for the UN.<sup>xv</sup> For example, for FY 1997 appropriations, the administration proposed



that UN arrears be paid off over five years in exchange for certain modifications to the UN assessment schedule and other reforms. According to a pro-UN Senate staffer, “the executive branch walked away after making the proposal.”<sup>xvi</sup> According to another pro-UN House staffer “the president has been unwilling to put enough weight behind the issue, to convince the Congress that there is merit in full support for the UN.”<sup>xvii</sup> According to a House UN critic, “the administration is not pushing.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Not only has the administration focused greater attention on domestic issues, but also on other budget items for foreign affairs activities. In the executive bureaucracy, State Department is the main supporter of the UN budget, and there are no institutional opponents. In its dealings with Congress, the executive has favored maintaining State Department’s operating account (e.g. for maintaining embassies) over paying the UN budget arrears. According to an OMB official, State is unwilling to achieve cost savings in its operating budget.<sup>xix</sup> Indeed, the demise of the Soviet Union and the creation of new nations requires the establishment of new embassies which eat up a large portion of the foreign policy dollar. The view that bilateral representation is paramount to multilateral means that these new embassies will get priority over the UN budget arrears.<sup>xx</sup>

The administration has also facilitated Congress’s withholding of arrears payments by encouraging a negative public image of the UN. This makes it difficult for the administration to pressure Congress to support payment of UN arrears. In the case of Somalia, for example, the administration encouraged the belief that the deaths of 18 American rangers was a failure of UN commanders when they were in fact under US command.<sup>xxi</sup> Moreover, in negotiating the Dayton accords, Assistant Secretary Holbrooke distanced his accords from the UN, highlighting its perception that the UN had failed. In addition, the administration’s focus on

ensuring that UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali does not serve another term undermines the credibility of the UN. The administration has also adopted the congressional critique of a bloated and inefficient UN administration. In a speech in March 1996 for example, US ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright asserted that the UN bureaucracy has grown to "elephantine proportions."<sup>xxii</sup>

### **A Difficult Issue for Special Interest Groups**

US elected officials are often influenced by special interest groups who effectively lobby and mobilize public support. This is particularly true in the case of specialized or complicated issues. As such, in order to fully answer the question of why the US has not paid its UN arrears, one must also answer the question: how have special interest groups affected decisions on paying UN arrears?

While there are a number of small groups that support the United Nations, the largest and most focused is the United Nations Association (UNA). The UNA has attempted to persuade the US to pay its arrears in a number of ways. In addition to direct lobbying of Congress and the administration, the UNA has attempted to increase the public profile of the arrears issue.<sup>xxiii</sup> For example, the head of the UNA drew press attention to the UN arrears issue by sending a public letter to the United Nations asserting that he was embarrassed by his country's failure to pay its dues. He included a check for \$44 representing his family's portion of the US debt to the UN.<sup>xxiv</sup> However, this was a rare success for UNA. A search of the New York Times and the Washington Post for articles in the past two years on the US debt issue reveals only three articles

This lack of sympathetic press is reflected in an absence of public pressure for Congress to pay US dues. According to a pro-UN Hill staffer, "UN constituents -- students, professors,

foreign affairs organizations, etc. -- are not mobilized on this issue.”<sup>xxv</sup> And, a staffer on the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee claimed that he has seen “maybe one letter on UN arrears in four years.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

Another potentially important interest group is the other UN members, in particular America’s European allies. Indeed, European governments have lobbied the Congress directly on the UN arrears issue, but have had little effect. According to a Republican staffer on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Congress is unlikely to respond positively to these requests because of European unwillingness to tighten economic sanctions on Iran, Libya and Cuba.<sup>xxvii</sup> The Europeans have also attempted to send the message to the administration and Congress that they are not pleased with the US non-payment by removing the US from the UN committee that oversees administrative questions and reviews the UN’s budget.<sup>xxviii</sup> This does not appear to have helped the cause. Indeed, some in the administration fear that such actions will be counterproductive, leading to a Congressional backlash.

Two characteristics of the current Congress makes life particularly difficult for these pro-UN interest groups. First, power on the Hill is much more diffuse than a decade ago. According to the Executive Director of UNA, UNA finds the Congress increasingly difficult to lobby: “It is very difficult to know where to focus.” While certain Congressmen and Senators have more influence than others on the UN budget, UNA feels it needs to deal with the Congress as a whole, which is extremely difficult for such a small organization.

Second, several observers have argued that there is a “high level of ignorance” on the Hill regarding the UN and its purpose. The generational change that has occurred in Congress over the past four years means that most Representatives have very little experience with the UN. As such, they are not at all familiar with its purpose and have inconsistent expectations.

As such, before UN supporters can “lobby” Congress, they must first “educate” Congress about the UN

### **Conclusion: The American Context**

This leads us to the final observation of this essay. If Americans were deeply interested in the UN, Congress would not need to be “educated.” Congress would educate itself. Moreover, Congress would be less inclined to use the UN arrears as leverage for other policy objectives; and the President would put greater emphasis on the arrears issue. The unifying factor behind all of the causes of US arrears examined in this paper is an American ambivalence toward the UN. Americans are unsure of what role they want the UN to play in American foreign policy and are thus perpetually disappointed with the organization. This perspective shapes the debate. It provides the context for the political actors. Until Americans determine what role they want the UN to play in global affairs, the US is likely to maintain the appearance of inconsistent support for the UN.

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<sup>1</sup> Boutros Boutros Ghali “The U.S. Must Pay Its Dues,” <http://www.un.org/News/sg.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Interview with OMB official, 12/06/96

<sup>3</sup> “Some Want U.S. to Leave U.N.,” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, November 28 1995, p 3320.

<sup>4</sup> Senator Jesse Helms. “Saving the U.N.,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1996, Vol 75, No 5, pp 2-6

<sup>5</sup> John Isaacs “Just put it on our tab,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*, October 1993, p8

<sup>6</sup> “As U.N. Marks Its 50th Year, Congress Demands Change,” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, October 21 1995, p 3214.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Democratic Senate staffer on 12/04/96.

<sup>8</sup> “Conferees Curb Funds for U.N. and for Broadcasts to Cuba,” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, October 16, 1993, p. 2819

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Steven Dimoff, Executive Director of UNA, 12/05/96

<sup>10</sup> Interview with OMB official, 12/06/96.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Republican House staffer, 12/03/96.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with State Department official, 11/24/96.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with OMB official, 12/06/96

<sup>14</sup> Interview with staffer on Senate Commerce, Justice, State, and Judiciary Appropriations Subcommittee, 12/05/96

<sup>15</sup> This point was made by a variety of House staffers, both Republican and Democratic

<sup>16</sup> Interview with staffer on House Commerce, Justice, State, and Judiciary Appropriations Subcommittee, 12/05/96

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a Republican House staffer, 12/02/96

<sup>18</sup> Interview with House Foreign Affairs Committee staffer, 12/03/96.

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<sup>xx</sup> Interview with OMB official, 12/06/96.

<sup>xx</sup> Interview with Steven Dimoff, Executive Director of UNA, 12/05/96

<sup>xxi</sup> Stanley Meisler "From Great Hope to Scapegoat," *The Washington Monthly*, Vol. 28, No 7-8 (July 1996) pp 30-34.

<sup>xxii</sup> Madeleine K Albright. "The UN: What's in it for the U.S?," in *U S Department of State Dispatch*, Vol 7, No. 11 (March 11, 1996) pp. 104-106

<sup>xxiii</sup> Interview with Steven Dimoff, Executive Director of UNA, 12/05/96

<sup>xxiv</sup> "Redeeming U S Debt at the UN," *The New York Times*, April 21, 1996, page 6, column 1,

<sup>xxv</sup> Interview with a Republican House, 12/02/96.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Interview with staffer on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 12/03/96

<sup>xxvii</sup> Interview with staffer on House Foreign Affairs Committee, 12/03/96.

<sup>xxviii</sup> "US Ousted From Panel on UN's Budget," *The New York Times*, November 9, 1996, page 7, column 3

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Jarren,

This is a comprehensive, well-researched, and educational paper. The numerous interviews, presenting different perspectives, are especially interesting. Additionally, the writing is clear and holds the reader's attention. The topic is not your personal area of expertise, which highlights your extensive research. For all these reasons, I consider your paper the top effort / #1 essay for our seminar.  
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